

# Curiosity, intelligence and spirit of adventure: challenging misconceptions about low-skilled EU migrants



*Curiosity, intelligence and spirit of adventure are the attributes of many low-skilled migrants to the United Kingdom. In this post, **Simone Varriale** challenges the misconceptions about EU migrants in the current debate. He presents two stories of Italian migrants that explain why dangerous assumptions about low-skilled migration should not feed into policy proposals, and why the government's current post-Brexit immigration plans have little to do with meritocracy.*

A longstanding [advocate of meritocracy](#), Prime Minister Theresa May [has declared](#) that the government's proposals for immigration after Brexit are "based on merit" and on what people "can do", rather than "where they come from". This means privileging high-skilled migrants – but only those meeting a still unclear [salary cap](#) – and bringing down low-skilled EU migration. May's statements betray some unfortunate and hard-to-kill assumptions about high-skilled and low-skilled migrants. [The former are frequently depicted as uniquely talented individuals](#), the latter as ordinary people who come to the UK for economic necessity and who, [according to May](#), "can do" very little for this country or to improve their situation. As the government's proposals are based on these assumptions, they risk penalising EU migrants from working-class backgrounds regardless of their talent and hard work.

I interviewed 56 Italians who moved to England after the 2008 economic crisis and who live mostly in the West Midlands and the Greater London area. Among these, 26 had their first job in the catering and hospitality sectors or in low-paid positions that do not require degrees. The others came to England as students or started with graduate jobs, but only one of them started with a £30,000 job (the salary threshold for high-skilled migrants from outside the EU). Perhaps you can start seeing how a migration system favouring highly paid professionals would cut off this very diverse migrant group. But there is a more important point that needs to be stressed. Many of my participants are first-generation graduates and come from working class, rural and migrant backgrounds. Their stories challenge simplistic stereotypes about the social immobility, lack of talent or [laziness](#) of low-skilled migrants.

Some of these socially mobile Italians who started climbing the social ladder already in Italy came to the UK as graduate students or professionals. Others started working in the hospitality sector while studying at British universities or applying for graduate positions. Others still have had careers in the catering sector. They certainly are not lazy, given the emotional and psychological efforts associated with both [social](#) and geographical mobility (and with studying and working in a foreign language). The following two stories elucidate why dangerous assumptions about low-skilled migration should not feed into policy proposals. And why the government's plans have little to do with meritocracy.

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Grazia had lived in the UK for five years when we spoke. She moved to the West Midlands right after high school to work as an au pair, as she wanted to improve her English. Grazia's high school trains workers for the hospitality sector. In Italy, we call it the professional high school track, and it is [predominantly attended by young people with working class and migrant backgrounds](#). This track is [strongly stigmatised in Italy](#), as the students attending it are characterised as less intelligent than those enrolling into the academic track (which is more likely to be taken by children of middle-class parents). People who take the professional track are also less likely to enrol into higher education. This is not the case of Grazia though. Like many EU migrants, she had not planned for how long she would stay in the UK. After the au pair experience, she worked as a waitress in different establishments for about a year while taking English classes. She quickly realised that she wanted to do "something more" and that "a diploma is no longer useful these day". She started thinking about higher education: "It's been quite difficult to decide what to study and why I want to study it. I started thinking that I like to work on details and to organise things. So I thought 'let's try a degree in events management, let's see how it is to study in English'"

Like many first-generation graduates, Grazia had to navigate higher education without the knowledge and support of parents who themselves are graduates. Moreover, she had to do it in English, working out by herself how British higher education works. She successfully completed a honours degree in three years. Since her parents could not afford to pay her fees, she took on debt and kept working as a waitress. By the time of our interview she was working as an event manager in a hotel and was thinking about starting a Master's Degree. She also asked me a lot of questions about what is a PhD, why I decided to embark into it and what one has to do to get there. Grazia's ongoing journey of social mobility would not be possible without freedom of movement. While the au pair programme she took remains in place, it's still [not clear how this will change after Brexit](#). More importantly, after her au pair experience, Grazia needed some time to figure out what she wanted to do next.

This is not uncommon among my participants without graduate parents. Andrew, like Grazia, took the professional high school track in Italy and, once in London, needed a couple of years to figure out if he wanted to enrol into a university programme or not. Eventually, he got accepted into a prestigious acting school, but in the meantime, he worked in a warehouse and as a waiter, while cultivating his passion for acting and filmmaking. For less privileged EU migrants, freedom of movement has opened important possibilities of social mobility and self-discovery. For Andrew – a black Italian who moved to London in his early 20s – it also meant having the possibility of leaving a country in which he was frequently reminded that he was [not Italian enough](#). To be sure, neither Andrew, nor Grazia left Italy for economic necessity, and among my interviewees, this is rarely the only motivation for moving abroad. 'Low-skilled' migration is informed by the same curiosity and spirit of adventure (and indeed intelligence) that tends to be granted to more privileged migrants.

Working class European migration remains significantly understudied, especially because most research on West and South European migrants focuses on high-skilled workers and graduates with a middle-class background. In a sense, this is a secret history of Italian and European migration that risks being erased in the name of meritocracy, in the UK but also [elsewhere in Europe](#). Ironically, there is much more meritocracy in this history than in the government's proposals, which favour the most privileged EU migrants, whereas talent and hard work are qualities of a much wider and more diverse group of European citizens.

*This article gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Brexit or the London School of Economics.*

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